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A Research Framework for Citizen Participation via E-Consultation

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ABSTRACT

The objective of engaging citizens in government decision making is renewed with the opportunities offered by IT. One such instance of ICT applications is e-Consultation. In this paper we present a research framework for investigating citizen participation in the context of e-Consultation. The framework is developed by first examining existing participation theories from political science literature. The diverse perspectives offered by the different theories are compared and integrated to derive classes of factors pertinent to citizen participation. As we are interested in understanding how citizen participation can be facilitated via e-Consultation, we also investigate the IT factors that may be relevant to participation in the electronic context. The end result is the construction of an integrated framework that can guide research in the study of electronic participation in a systematic manner. Future research directions are also suggested.

Keywords

Citizen participation, e-Consultation, participation theory, research framework, information technology factors

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been a renewed interest to engage citizens in government decision making with the emergence of information technology (IT) applications such as e-Consultation. This is evident from the number of e-Consultation implementations around the globe such as, Denmark's Nordpol.dk (<http://www.nordpol.dk>), Estonia's TOM portal (<http://tom.riik.ee/>), and Singapore's Government Consultation Portal (<http://app.feedback.gov.sg/asp/index.asp>). The impetus to implement e-Consultation can be attributed to the growing awareness of the need to attain more democratic governance (Coleman and Gotze, 2001). This is indicated in a recent OECD (2001) report entitled "Citizens as Partners", which notes: "...democratic governments are under pressure to adopt a new approach to policy-making – one which places greater emphasis on citizen involvement both upstream and downstream to decision-making. It requires governments to provide ample opportunity for information, consultation and participation by citizens in developing policy options” (p.71)

E-Consultation can be viewed as a policy instrument intended to enhance citizen participation in policy making (Whyte and Macintosh, 2002). In a typical e-Consultation, government bodies define the issues for consultation, set the questions and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions online. During the consultation sessions, citizens get to express their views to the relevant government agencies or officials, and may exchange opinions among themselves. Rationale for e-Consultation include legitimizing government's decisions, educating citizens about the intricacy of policy making, and providing opportunities for mutual learning between government and citizens (Coleman and Gotze 2001). Being an online version of public consultation, e-Consultation offers a number of potential benefits over its offline counterpart. Some of these benefits include: enhanced 24/7 accessibility; overcoming the scale issue as number of participants are not restricted by time/space limitations; and the Internet's mass transmission and reception capabilities that may help promote deliberation essential for an effective consultation.

While the potential benefits offered by e-Consultation seem promising, implementations of e-Consultation often do not manage to obtain adequate response. For instance, the first e-Consultation by the UK Advisory Committee on genetic testing only received 20 responses (Needham 2001). Low rates of citizen participation indicate that the factors that are significant to attain citizen participation via the electronic application are not well understood. Such understanding is required because attaining adequate citizen participation is the prerequisite to achieving the desired objectives of e-Consultation. Therefore, this study aims to construct a research framework that elucidates the antecedent conditions for the attainment of citizen participation via e-Consultation. To achieve this aim, we first review existing theories of participation to derive antecedent

factors pertinent to citizen participation. We then investigate the IT features that can influence electronic participation based on previous literature. The two streams of factors are integrated into a research framework that aims to provide a holistic picture of conditions important to attaining citizen participation via e-Consultation, which can be used to guide further research in this area.

THEORIES OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

In this section we will describe five major theories that have been employed to explain citizen participation. Each of these theories will be discussed in turn, and attempts will be made to explicate the linkages between the theories.

Socio-economic Model of Participation

The socio-economic model attempts to explain citizen participation in terms of the social circumstances of individuals, such as age, education level and financial status, which shape their attitudes towards participating (Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992). The model holds that individuals who are older, better educated and wealthier are more likely to participate than those who are not. The logic is that individuals' upbringing and personal environment grant them the relevant political skills and resources, which in turn shape their civic attitudes towards political participation. Civic attitudes include an interest in and knowledge of politics, a sense of political efficacy, and also a feeling of obligation to participate (Parry et al., 1992).

This model has been criticized for several reasons. First, the postulated age effect may well be a result of life cycle changes. As pointed out by Putnam (2000), the "civic generation" of Americans who came to adulthood in the mid-twentieth century were observed to be more active citizens than their parents or their children, and remained relatively more active than other cohorts as they aged. Second, the prediction that higher education level would lead to higher participation is also questionable, as some studies (e.g. Lyons and Alexandra, 2000) have shown otherwise.

Rational Model of Participation

Rational choice model of participation sees citizen participation as a rational activity that serves to promote or defend the goals of participants with the maximum of benefits and the minimum of costs (e.g. Green and Shapiro, 1994). The model postulates that individuals are by nature economically rational actors, who seek to maximize their benefits from any activity, while minimizing the costs. In this light, the decision to participate is essentially an outcome from cost-benefit calculation (Pattie, Syed and Whiteley, 2002). Benefits that can be obtained from participation include the ability to influence policy outcomes in ways that is to one's advantage, while costs include effort and financial resources that one needs to incur to participate. Additionally, the perceived benefits are closely tied to one's political efficacy. The more an individual thinks his personal action will bring forth favorable outcomes, i.e., the higher his political efficacy (Campbell. Gurin and Milner, 1954), the more weight he will set on the benefits that he can obtain.

The model has limitation when accounting for situations where there is involvement of many actors, such as in an election. In such situations, the probability that the action of any one individual, such as casting a vote, will make substantial difference to the outcome is extremely small. This leads to almost negligible perceived benefits from participating. Considering also the costs incurred, such as time and effort required, a truly rational actor will choose not to participate. However, we do see people voting in elections. In defense of the rational choice model, researchers have suggested that the cost incurred by participating in elections has been exaggerated (e.g. Milner, 2002), and call for a more careful consideration of the benefits of voting (e.g. Dunleavy, 1991). The reasoning for this is that participating in elections is mostly not one-shot in nature. Since the impacts may extend into the future, this causes people to still participate despite the small immediate benefits.

Both the rational choice model and socio-economic model highlight the importance of political efficacy in explaining participation. However, the rational choice model considers the broad civic orientation of individuals of minor importance when compared to the perceived benefits and costs associated with participation.

Civic Voluntarism Model

Cited as the most widely used participation theory (e.g. Seyd, Whiteley, and Pattie, 2001), civic voluntarism model (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995) attempts to explain participation from an inverted angle of "why people do not participate", and suggests three answers: because they can't; they don't want to; and because nobody asked them to. This translates into three classes of factors, namely resources, motivation, and mobilization respectively. Resources refer to money, time, and civic skills that an individual possesses. Civic skills refer to the organizational and communications abilities that can facilitate political activities. The second class of motivational factors encompasses an individual's interest in politics; sense of political efficacy; the group consciousness that endows individuals with a sense that their fate is linked to that of others; identification

with a political party; and commitment to specific policies that individuals would like to see implemented (Verba et al., 1995, p. 272). Last, mobilization refers to the extent to which individuals are influenced by people around them, such as friends and family members, to participate. These three classes of factors are posited to contribute to citizen participation.

The model suffers from a few limitations. As with the socio-economic model, the proposition that more resources will lead to higher participation is questionable, as studies showed that participation has been declining despite the general rise of living standards (Putnam, 2000). The model also does not consider the broader political institutions that may shape citizen participation (Rubenson, 2000). For instance, do the political institutions have an education system in place that is supportive of civic skill inculcation? Do the existing political institutions have the infrastructure for a strong recruitment network? Answers to such questions could enable a deeper understanding of how citizen participation can be facilitated.

This model is in some respects an extension of the socio-economic model, in that both models stress the influence of resources on participation. However, the conceptualization of resources in the civic voluntarism model is broader than in the socio-economic model because the former model includes time resources as well as economic and education resources.

The civic voluntarism model also shares certain commonalities with the rational choice model. Specifically, both models elucidate the importance of political efficacy, albeit in different ways. The rational choice model treats political efficacy as a moderator between benefits and participation, whereas the civic voluntarism model treats it as a part of motivation. The civic voluntarism model also encompasses elements that resemble benefits and costs, such as the ability to influence policy outcomes in its motivation construct; and time and money in its resources construct.

General Incentives Model

Developed by Syed and Whiteley (1994, 2002), the general incentives model synthesizes social factors (e.g. norms) and individual factors (e.g. perceived costs and benefits) in trying to explain citizen participation. The essence of the model is that actors need incentives to participate in politics, and these incentives can be categorized into five types: collective, selective, group, expressive, and social norms-derived incentives. Apart from incentives, the model also takes into account the perceived costs of participation and individual's political efficacy.

Collective incentives are derived from policy goals (e.g., an increment in pension) and are available for all to enjoy regardless of whether one participates. The nature of collective incentives raises controversy over its influence on participation, as one can simply free-ride on the efforts of others to enjoy the benefits. This leads Olson (1965) to suggest that participation may only occur if some of the benefits are selective incentives, that is, they can be restricted to those who participate. The selective incentives can be further delineated into process, ideological, and outcome incentives. Selective process incentives are derived from the process of participation itself and have two aspects; one is related to enjoying politics for its own sake and the other depends on interacting with like-minded people. Selective ideological incentives are prompted by the similar beliefs shared by members in a group, such as a strong stance on environmental protection, and the ability to express these deeply held beliefs among members. Last, selective outcome incentives are related to achieving personal advancement in politics, such as the ambition to become a political leader.

In addition, there are group incentives that relate to individuals' perception about the efficacy of the group as a whole, such as the political party that they join. Another set of incentives is based on expressive or affective attachment to a group. Such incentives relate to the identification one has with a group, and are grounded in a sense of loyalty and affection. The last class of incentives is incentives derived from social norms, and refers to the influence that other people have on an individual's willingness to participate.

A shortfall of the model is that it does not take into account socio-economic factors (e.g., education received) that inculcate an individual's civic attitude and skills. It also doesn't consider the broader political institutions that may play a part in shaping individuals' perceptions about politics (Rubenson, 2000).

Parallels can be drawn between the general incentives model and the civic voluntarism model. One of the motivations in the civic voluntarism model, i.e., to see certain policies implemented, can be interpreted as a form of collective incentives. In addition, individual's interest in politics can be seen as a form of selective incentives. Two other elements of motivation: the group consciousness that endows individuals with a sense that their fate is linked to that of others; and identification with a political party, are related to expressive incentives. The incentives derived from social norms are similar to the concept of mobilization. The two models, however, differ in that the civic voluntarism model treats political efficacy as an element within motivation whereas the general incentive model sees it as moderating the relationships between incentives and participation.

Social Capital Theory of Participation

Adapted from social capital theory (Coleman, 1988), the social capital theory of participation attempts to explain citizen participation from a social network perspective. One of the most widely cited works in this vein is Putnam's (1993) study of Italian regional government, which found strong positive relationships between social capital and institutional performance of governments.

The central concept of this theory, social capital, refers to the connections among individuals that form social networks, and the resulting norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness arising from the networks (Putnam, 1993). It is intimately rooted in the associational life that exists within a community. The main premise of the theory is that a community with a rich associational life has a distinct advantage over a community with an impoverished associational life (Pattie et al., 2002). As Putnam (1993) explains, "Civic associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government... both because of their 'internal' effects on individual members and because of their 'external' effects on the wider policy...." (p. 89-90).

The theory highlights three features of social capital: networks of civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and trust. It is argued that these features of social capital 'reduce incentives to defect, reduce uncertainty, and provide models for future co-operation' (Putnam, 1993, p.177). The logic is that networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity, or the degree of consensus in everyday exchange relations in the social systems, because frequent interaction among a diverse group of people tends to encourage the formation of such norms (Putnam, 2000, p. 21). In turn, the norms of reciprocity cultivate social trust among people in a society, which can be understood as "the belief that the results of somebody's intended action will be appropriate from our point of view" (Mistral, 1996, pg. 9-10). Social trust can in turn serve to lubricate the inevitable frictions of social life (Putnam 2000, p.135). In sum, the existence of social capital can facilitate citizens' participation in political activities.

This theory has been criticized to suffer from tautological problems (e.g. Milner, 2002). It has been argued that the antecedent proposed for the production of social capital, i.e., associational life, is also considered to be one of the socially desirable outcomes of social capital. However, it should be noted that the associational life that contributes to social capital is non-political in nature (e.g., citizen's taking part in hobby groups), whereas the favorable outcome of social capital is the political participation of citizens (e.g., in voting). Since the direction of causality is from non-political to political social capital, it does not constitute a serious tautological problem. Another criticism is that the theory does not consider the influence of individual's motives on participation, such as the benefits that one may obtain from participation. Even in the presence of social capital, an individual's intention to participate may be undermined if there is no attractive benefit to do so. Last, as with the civic voluntarism model, this theory also doesn't consider the influence of broader political institutions (Rubenson, 2000).

ANTECEDENTS DERIVED FROM PARTICIPATION THEORIES

The preceding discussion of participation theories reveals their commonalities as well as their complementary nature, in that each of the theories is strong in certain aspects but lacking in others. An attempt to synthesize the theories leads to the identification of four classes of factors: incentives-related factors, resources-related factors, personal belief factors, and social capital factors. The scrutinization of the theories also highlights the need to consider a fifth class of factors i.e., political institutions.

The incentive-related factors are drawn from the general incentives model. This class of factors subsumes the benefits construct of the rational choice model and also the motivation and mobilization constructs of the civic voluntarism model. Resource-related factors are mainly drawn from the civic voluntarism model. Specifically, the resources construct under the civic voluntarism model encapsulates the influence of socio-economic factors such as age and education level in its conceptualization of civic skills. Civic skills are gradually acquired as one grows older and also through education received. Additionally, the resources construct also captures costs in the rational choice model in that costs can be seen as resources that one needs to possess in order to participate. Social capital theory provides a distinctive perspective on participation and supports the class of social capital factors. Political efficacy that is highlighted in several of the theories discussed is categorized as a personal belief factor as it concerns individual's belief that he or she is able to influence political outcomes. Last, we add the political institutions factor that has largely been overlooked in the literature (Rubenson, 2000). This captures the settings within which political participation takes place, such as the presence of a government that is supportive of civic associations and infrastructure that can facilitate citizen participation.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FEATURES

As we are interested in factors pertinent to citizen participation in the context of e-Consultation, we also explore the IT features that may affect participation.

Anonymity

In the computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature, Hiltz and Turoff (1978) found that computer-based media produce a sense of impersonality that is further increased by user anonymity. Research on group support systems (GSS) has found a positive impact of anonymity on group performance (e.g. DeSanctis and Gallupe, 1987). The logic is that anonymity may remove social cues related to social status that contribute to evaluation apprehension. Evaluation apprehension is unfavorable as it tends to inhibit participation in traditional face-to-face meetings (McLeod and Elston, 1995). By avoiding the occurrence of evaluation apprehension through provision of anonymity, GSS are found to increase participation level of a group (e.g. Connolly, Jessup, and Valacich, 1990).

Simultaneity

Another IT-related feature that is found to increase participation is the simultaneity capability of IT. This enables individuals to participate at the same time by typing their ideas for others to see. The concept is similar to the notion of parallelism and concurrency in the media literature, e.g., in media richness theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986) and media synchronicity theory (Dennis, Valacich, Speier, and Morris, 1998). The simultaneity of IT is found to increase participation by overcoming production blocking that inhibits the ideas generation process, as there is no need for one to wait for one's turn to express one's ideas (Shepherd, Reinig, Yen, and Nunamaker, 1995). It can also reduce the cognitive load and distraction of members in trying to remember their ideas while waiting for their turn.

Connectivity and Communalities

In their effort to extend the public goods theory to computer mediated contexts, Fulk, Flanagan, Kalman, Monge, and Ryan (1996) argue that the connectivity and communalities features of interactive communication technology behave differently from traditional material goods in the collective action context, and hence, deserve special attention. Connectivity refers to the ability that enables individuals to directly communicate with each other, whereas communalities refers to the availability of a commonly accessible pool of information to all (Fulk et al., 1996; Monge, Fulk, Kalman, Flanagan, Parnassa, and Rumsey, 1998), such as through a discretionary database or an electronic forum. These features afforded by interactive communication technology, which are termed connective and communal capabilities, are posited to ease individuals' participation in information sharing and exchanges. Monge et al. (1998), by bringing in concepts from GSS research, propose that increased provision of connectivity and communalities would lead to an increased amount of information generated in the context of inter-organizational information systems.

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION VIA E-CONSULTATION

In this section we present a preliminary research framework that integrates the five classes of factors derived from the participation theories and the IT features described above (see Figure 1).

Consistent with the rational choice model, civic voluntarism model, and general incentives model, incentive-related factors and resources-related factors are proposed to have a direct influence on citizen participation via e-Consultation (henceforth called "participation"). Additionally, we adopt the perspective of the rational choice model and general incentives model on political efficacy, and propose that personal belief factors moderate the effect of incentives-related factors on participation.

We treat social capital factors as moderating the relationship between incentives-related factors and participation. This is because the presence of social capital factors (network of civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, trust) may strengthen the effect of incentives on participation. For instance, the presence of trust can make the influence of incentives derived from social norms on participation stronger. This is because belief that the people who mobilize an individual will act in an appropriate way, may lead the individual to more willingly conform to their influence to participate.

As pointed out by Rubenson (2000), political institutions may affect social capital formation because the existence of political institutions that are supportive of civic organization formation can help create rich social capital. In addition, political institutions may also affect citizens' political efficacy since a citizen living in an environment that is receptive to citizens' inputs is likely to possess a higher belief in his ability to influence policy outcomes. Political institutions with education infrastructure in place that promotes civic skill learning also contribute to citizens' resources to participate. Hence

we propose that political institutions have a direct influence on social capital factors, personal belief factor, and resources-related factors.

Last, as studies have shown that factors such as anonymity and simultaneity have a positive impact on participation, IT factors are posited to directly influence citizen participation. Additionally, we also propose that IT factors have a moderating effect on the relationship between incentives-related factors and participation. The rationale for this is that IT factors such as connectivity and communality may help make certain incentives for participation more salient. For instance, the presence of communality in e-Consultation (through discussion forums and publication of policy information) helps citizens understand the policy details and how they can contribute. This makes collective and selective incentives more visible to citizens. Further, the presence of high connectivity may also fortify the influence of selective ideological incentives on participation by enabling citizens to communicate with like-minded people easily.

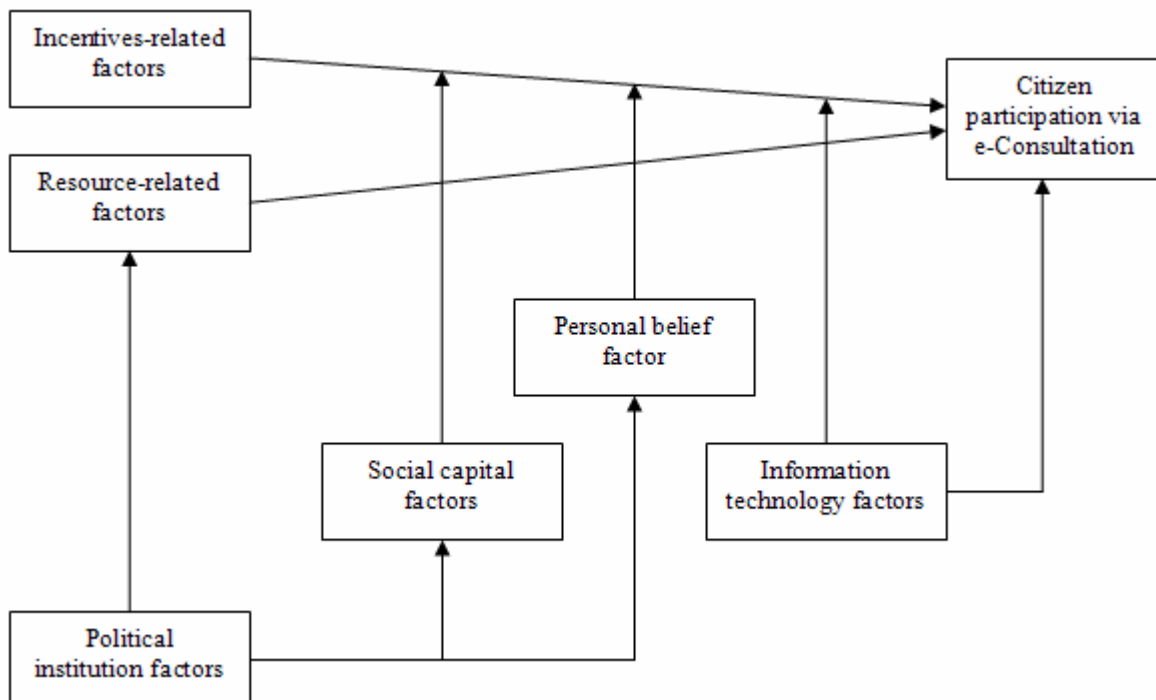


Figure 1. A Framework for Citizen Participation via E-Consultation

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper builds on strong theoretical bases in presenting a research framework that may be employed to investigate the factors contributing to electronic citizen participation, particularly via e-Consultation. The framework extends existing literature by synthesizing the major participation theories and incorporating IT features that may influence participation so that a coherent picture can be obtained of factors contributing to citizen participation via e-Consultation. The framework may also sensitize practitioners who implement e-Consultation to the various types of factors that they may need to consider in order to promote citizen participation.

To validate the framework, specific relationships between the variables belonging to the different classes of factors will be derived from the literature. Also, the common forms of e-Consultation will be identified to examine the factors pertinent to a particular e-Consultation form. For instance, some e-Consultation implementations employ online surveys, while others use electronic discussion forums or chat-rooms. It is expected that the factors that are pertinent to citizen participation in different e-Consultation forms may differ. Based on the classification of e-Consultation forms and the relationships between factors that are identified, research models for various e-Consultation forms can be developed. The models can be refined and empirically tested using case-study, survey, or experiment methodologies. Samples can be drawn from the participants in targeted e-Consultation contexts as well as the general population. The expected research outcome is the formulation of

research models for various e-Consultation forms, and the identification of participation factors that are pertinent to them. Overall such a research program may lead to a better understanding of how citizen participation via e-Consultation can be promoted.

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